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### Laramie County woman foils scam

Cheyenne's Jean Hess has taken the case involving a Nigerian con to the sheriff's department.

By Jessica Lowell

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CHEYENNE n Since Dec. 1, Jean Hess has developed a new hobby: She's corresponding via e-mail with a woman in Africa.

They aren't exactly 21st century pen pals, though.

Hess listed a 1989 Pontiac van for sale in a classified ad in the Wyoming Tribune-Eagle, and found that she apparently hooked herself a Nigerian advance-fee scam artist.

"I could tell right away that something was wrong," Hess said recently, but she didn't know at first she was dealing with someone overseas.

Hess is concerned that she's not the only mark singled out by the scam, and she knows other people who have been taken in by similar attempts.

"They are touching on people who are hurting," Hess said. Some people sell their cars, not because they are upgrading, but because they need the cash to pay their bills. If they get scammed, she said, they are only worse off.

Hess's correspondent uses the name Lisa Grant.

"She wasn't really interested in the car. There was no bargaining on the price at all. Nobody really expects to get full price, sight unseen," the Laramie County woman said. Nor did Grant ask about the vehicle's condition.

Hess easily identified other red flags over the course of their correspondence, which is ongoing.

In a Dec. 1 e-mail, Grant sent a message to Michael, agreeing to the deal and promising to send a cashier's check.

"You are receiving an excess check," Grant wrote; in fact, the check was for \$4,500 while Hess had listed the van at \$1,500.

"When you receive the check, go ahead and cash, after that is done remove your sales fee, western union fee and the \$80 compensation for holding item, then after that is done, whatever the rest balance is go ahead and western union it to the shipper, who would then come round for the pickup," Grant said. "I would provide his info to wire funds to at that time."

The check came via UPS to Hess. She took it to her credit union, Meridian Trust, where the manager confirmed it wasn't legitimate. The bank it was drawn on, B and T, in Arlington, Va., is a real bank, but it had reported seeing several similar faked checks.

Hess never intended to follow through on Grant's request. If she had, she would have lost money in the latest incarnation of the Nigerian advanced-fee scam.

It works this way:

n The buyer, in this case Grant, pays for an item with a cashier's check for an amount much higher than the sale price.

n The buyer asks the seller to refund the difference and send it by a wire transfer service such as Western Union.

n Often the buyer pressures the seller to move quickly n and that's an essential part of the scam, because the check is generally counterfeit.

n The scam artist intends the seller to forward funds before the check is found to be fake. If the money is sent through a service such as Western Union, it's untraceable and can be picked up anywhere in the world.

The Better Business Bureau, among other agencies, has been warning about the car purchase scam for at least three years.

"Even if your bank initially accepts the check, there is no guarantee of authenticity. If the check turns out to be counterfeit, you will be held responsible for repaying the money," comes the warning from the Missouri Attorney General's Office via the Better Business Bureau.

Hess took her case to the Laramie County Sheriff's Department. She was advised to wait for the check to come, then take it to the office of the U.S. Attorney.

That office forwarded it to the FBI. Hess said she was told that because the dollar value is so low, the FBI wouldn't investigate.

Interspersed among the e-mails were static-laden telephone calls from the 510 area code. Hess said she suspects they are being made on a disposable cell phone. By then, Hess had discovered she was dealing with someone from Nigeria, when Grant sent her details about the shipping company.

"And if it's in Nigeria, with no extradition, their hands are tied," she said.

Hess said she's reassured they are overseas, and that distance has given her the security she needed to spin out the game even longer. She has invented reasons to explain why she hasn't yet wired the excess money n the bank has a hold on the check, she's been out of town, she's misplaced the shipper's name, she can't get to the bank because she has to work.

In one of her responses, Grant sent her several Western Union locations in Cheyenne.

Hess said she's not sure how much longer she can spin out the e-mails. She may solicit excuses from her co-workers, who have been following the scam.

"I just don't have that much imagination," she said.

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